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Forty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 508th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 7 October 1996, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. MCHUMO (Tanzania)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.25 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: THE PURSUIT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SOLUTIONS (agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/863, 867 and 872)

1. Ms. ANDERSSON (Sweden) said that Sweden fully associated itself with the views that had been expressed by the European Union. She welcomed the solutions found during the 1990s to some of the protracted conflicts that had caused mass movements of people and had made return possible in southern Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. UNHCR's role in safeguarding humanitarian principles and preventing, addressing and resolving complex emergencies made the High Commissioner a key player on behalf of the international community. UNHCR must remain flexible while maintaining its focus. There was increased awareness of the need to involve both countries of asylum and countries of origin and to tie preventive action in with relief, post-conflict recovery and sustainable development, so as to promote eventual safe return. Since UNHCR was limited by its mandate and resources, it must act in close cooperation with other humanitarian, human rights and development organizations and with Governments. Repatriation programmes must include concern for successful reintegration, for example, in the Great Lakes region of Africa.

2. Successful examples of crisis prevention included UNHCR participation in the Regional Conference to address the problems of refugees, displaced persons, other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and relevant neighbouring States, held in Geneva in May 1996, and in the Humanitarian Issues Working Group concerning return to, and rehabilitation in, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Sweden had agreed to the operational plan and would participate in consultations on its implementation. She noted that no one had yet proposed a solution to the conflicts in Central and West Asia.

3. Such a comprehensive approach required the cooperation of other international organizations and States. Very important was the process initiated by Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/56, on the need to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian assistance within the United Nations system. In that regard, her Government welcomed the steps taken by UNHCR and the discussion within the Standing Committee; the role of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs was also vital. While there had been calls for memoranda of understanding and clearly-defined responsibilities and objectives, the key to inter-agency coordination lay in field operations, where there was a need for creative approaches to collaborative, cost-effective and sustainable ventures. The management changes initiated by the High Commissioner would make for situation-specific analyses in response to the organizational implications of a comprehensive approach to protection. In each case, a balance must be found between protection and assistance programmes.

4. The increased focus on countries of origin in the search for solutions raised the question of internally displaced persons, a matter in which the UNHCR mandate must be joined by a coordinated response from the United Nations system, not only as on humanitarian grounds but also to avoid further forced migrations.

5. In September 1996, the Swedish Government had presented a bill to Parliament outlining its migration and asylum policy. That bill made a commitment to a comprehensive approach involving efforts to promote peace, respect for human rights, social and economic development and continued support for UNHCR. A wider interpretation was given to the Geneva Convention, and victims of persecution by non-State agents were explicitly recognized as refugees under that Convention. As in the past, her Government was eager to provide legal protection to the victims of armed conflict, torture and other inhumane treatment, and the bill explicitly addressed the problems of victims of gender-related persecution, environmental disasters and persecution of homosexuals. Swedish resettlement cooperation with UNHCR, including the quota, would also be maintained, and Sweden urged other countries to join the existing group of resettlement countries.

6. Mr. AKAO (Japan) said UNHCR's two most significant achievements in 1996 had been the successful conclusion of the repatriation and resettlement processes in Mozambique and of the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-Chinese Refugees (CPA), adopted at the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees in 1989. There had been progress in countries such as Angola and Guatemala and while there were, as yet, no plans for large-scale repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons in the former Yugoslavia, the recent elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina augured well for the pursuit of durable solutions based on the Dayton Peace Agreements. Although various refugee problems persisted, for example, in the Great Lakes region of Africa, there had been no new large-scale refugee crisis in 1996, a fact which would allow UNHCR to use its resources to pursue lasting solutions rather than merely respond to emergencies.

7. With more than 1.4 million refugees, the Indo-Chinese refugee crisis had been one of the most serious in the world. Thanks to the CPA, the repatriation of non-refugees and the closure of refugee camps had been virtually completed by June 1996, and the CPA had been formally ended. In Japan, too, the majority of non-refugees had been repatriated through the Orderly Return Programme. The CPA had set a precedent as a comprehensive approach to durable solutions by combining the efforts of the countries concerned as well as the assistance of the international community, taking measures in both the countries of origin and the first asylum countries to ensure not only the repatriation of non-refugees, but also their integration in local communities in their countries of origin, and resettling in third countries those who were granted refugee status under screening procedures. By alleviating poverty in local communities, one of the root causes of the exodus, the recent economic development of Viet Nam had contributed to the success of the CPA.

8. The refugee situation was changing: asylum countries were demonstrating a less generous attitude towards refugees and the international community was placing greater emphasis on their human rights. A comprehensive approach along the lines of the CPA, might help to find durable solutions to that problem. Such an approach must be multi-faceted; it must find a political solution to the underlying problems, and economic aspects should also be addressed. Improvements in the social and economic infrastructures of the countries of origin were an important factor in the repatriation and reintegration of refugees, and rehabilitation and reconstruction in the

post-conflict period were crucial in preventing a further exodus. Assistance to neighbouring countries should be taken into account, since the inflow of large numbers of refugees impeded those countries' economic and social development, threatened to destabilize their social order and seriously affected their natural environment.

9. While UNHCR had the pivotal role in a comprehensive approach, political and economic factors might be beyond its control. UNHCR humanitarian activities might facilitate improvements in the political climate, but the Security Council or regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) should take prime responsibility for seeking political solutions. Similarly, in economic matters the UNHCR Quick Impact Projects (QIP) could play a catalytic role in the reintegration or rehabilitation of refugees, yet it was for the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and bilateral donors to pursue middle- or long-term development and post-conflict reconstruction. Close cooperation among those organizations was essential.

10. The root causes of refugee problems were difficult to detect and large-scale population displacements difficult to predict. However, early detection and prevention could solve problems at relatively low cost and, even after refugee outflows had begun, it was possible to prevent the situation from deteriorating. He welcomed the close cooperation between UNHCR and other international organizations during the Regional Conference on the Commonwealth of Independent States and the resulting Programme of Action, which offered a successful example of a regional approach. His Government supported UNHCR plans to hold regional consultations on populations displacements in Central Asia, South-West Asia and the Middle East, and hoped that they would produce durable solutions and had decided to contribute US$ 200,000 to defray the expenses of those consultations. Japan also welcomed two regional meetings on refugee issues scheduled for 1996: the Seminar on the Status and Treatment of Refugees to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Bangkok Principles Concerning the Treatment of Refugees, sponsored by UNHCR and the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee, and the Conference on Regional Approaches to Refugees and Displaced Persons in Asia, sponsored by Australia and UNHCR. In view of the lessons learned from the recent solution to the Indo-Chinese refugee problem, it was appropriate to emphasize the importance of a regional approach, and Japan intended to participate actively in those events.

11. It was becoming increasingly difficult for UNHCR to cope with complicated refugee issues, and coordinating the activities of humanitarian organizations should therefore be one of the international community's priorities. He welcomed UNHCR's efforts in implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/56. However, coordination for its own sake would merely produce greater inefficiency and, at the field level, it was the organization with the strongest operational presence in the country that should play the central role. Finally, in areas where UNHCR had neither expertise nor a mandate, it should cooperate closely with other United Nations bodies.

12. Since poverty in local communities was one of the root causes of refugee outflows, it was important to promote the development of developing countries. Japan had held a High-Level Seminar on African Development in August 1996, co-sponsored a High-Level Symposium on Conflicts in Africa, called "Road to

Nation-Building in the Post-Conflict Period", in September 1996, and hoped to convene the second meeting of the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II) in 1998; a preparatory meeting for that Conference was to be held in Tokyo in 1997.

13. Japan, deeply concerned about the threat to international security posed by anti-personnel mines, had decided to support international efforts for a worldwide ban on their use and to take unilateral initiatives in that regard. It also proposed to hold an international conference at the senior official level in Tokyo in March 1997 with a view to reinforcing international support for United Nations work in mine clearance, the development of new technology for land-mine detection and removal and international assistance for rehabilitation of land-mine victims.

14. Lastly, in view of the existence of 26 million refugees worldwide, Japan had decided to add an additional US$ 50 million to the funds that it had already contributed to UNHCR programmes in 1996.

15. Mr. LAFRENIERE (Canada) said that Canada welcomed the new format for the Executive Committee's annual debate, which offered the Committee the prospect of achieving broad international consensus on a complex issue, and also the theme of the pursuit of durable solutions, for it was not enough to sustain and protect the displaced victims of refugee crises, particularly when those victims were women and children. Leaving refugees for long periods in camps, or scattered abroad in a legal limbo, merely fostered long-term dependence and made permanent solutions more difficult. The paper on durable solutions (A/AC.96/872) rightly emphasized the importance of returning refugees to their countries of origin. However, a climate of confidence was an essential precondition for such a return. Where that was impossible, the preferred alternative was local integration, and Canada encouraged UNHCR to make renewed efforts in that regard. In cases where neither solution was feasible, resettlement abroad was the only practical option, and Canada had resettled over 25,000 refugees during 1996. The new Canadians, who, over the past few decades, had found shelter and a future in Canada, had greatly enriched its society, and other countries should recognize their own responsibility to provide tangible assistance of that kind.

16. In the search for durable solutions, all countries should support UNHCR, which should continue to examine its own performance and, when necessary, take difficult decisions. In that regard, Project Delphi, which was a significant effort by a United Nations agency to adapt to constantly changing demands, was most gratifying. Equally welcome was the greater delegation of decision-making to the field, the development of a capacity to extend and contract operations quickly and effectively, and result-oriented assessments of UNHCR programmes. All long-standing UNHCR operations and offices should be thoroughly assessed and, if they had outlived their usefulness, closed down.

17. The tools of the past were outdated and new ways must be sought to aid refugees by going beyond the traditional concept of protection and expanding the role of UNHCR in the field of prevention. UNHCR should contribute to research at the international level on the fundamental causes of refugee problems, including inter-ethnic hatred and nationalist extremism. Canada welcomed the UNHCR commitment to its Centre for Documentation and Research and

encouraged it to forge new alliances aimed at the development of an integrated global strategy, using as many international, regional and non-governmental organizations as possible. Preventive measures, like solutions, were as many and varied as the situations they were aimed at solving.

18. Other problems to be addressed were ways to obtain the support of the countries concerned in implementing effective preventive measures, establish the requisite conditions for voluntary repatriation and ensure the safety of refugees and workers in the field of humanitarian assistance.

19. Mr. van WULFFTEN PALTHE (Netherlands) said that UNHCR found itself in an increasingly difficult situation in the Great Lakes region of Africa with respect to the refugee caseload caused by the crisis in Rwanda. Under extremely difficult circumstances, it had been implementing a care and maintenance programme unrivalled in its history. At the same time, it seemed to be caught in the middle of a very complex political situation, with opposing factions fighting to control the refugee population; Governments threatening to repatriate refugees, if necessary by force; and countries of origin simply not doing enough to make voluntary repatriation possible. The security situation in and around the camps in Zaire was explosive, and the environmental degradation and various basic needs required urgent action. UNHCR could not be left in an isolated position in Zaire. The international community, the countries directly involved in the conflict and the United Nations as a whole needed urgently to develop a new repatriation policy in order to break the present stalemate in the region.

20. Like UNHCR, his country was of the view that voluntary repatriation should remain the core of any repatriation policy. In creating an overall framework for the enhanced repatriation of Rwandan refugees, the underlying principle was that forced repatriation was not viable. The Netherlands therefore proposed an alternative option, namely, a phased, step-by-step closing of the camps. The camp closures should be based on a clear set of criteria, among which security and manageability of the caseload were prominent. Consideration should be given first to closing the smaller camps located closest to the border, since they tended to increase instability in the region. The refugees in those camps would be free to choose between either repatriation or relocation. A package of material incentives would have to be placed at their disposal. They would also be informed that the level of assistance would be decreased if they opted for relocation. Host countries should be encouraged to start a dual screening process for those refugees who refused repatriation, the first in search of human rights violators, and the second to determine individual refugee status. Additional security measures were clearly required for such a strategy.

21. Conditions in Rwanda must improve if a lasting and safe return was to be possible. The judiciary needed to start processing the cases of those currently being held in prison. There was an important role for the human rights field operations to play in monitoring the return of refugees to their home communities. Land property issues needed to be resolved. Also essential to the repatriation process was the continuing support of the Governments of Zaire and the United Republic of Tanzania. Enhanced security arrangements, screening, and compliance with asylum procedures demanded greater involvement by those Governments. He trusted that the necessary political will was there.

Nevertheless, those asylum countries could not be asked to carry the burden alone. The need now was for united action by UNHCR, Rwanda, the asylum countries and the donor community, in order to find durable solutions to the crisis in an increasingly volatile region. To that end, he looked to UNHCR for leadership and his country stood ready to contribute further to the development of a new repatriation policy.

22. Mr. TABESH (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that political instability, social injustice, human rights violations and intolerance had traditionally been named as the main causes of various forms of displacement and refugee movements. What had received less attention, however, was the fact that a deteriorating economic situation in some parts of the world had emerged as a serious challenge. If that problem were not properly addressed, the chances of finding durable solutions to various forms of displacement were slim. Since most of the refugee-producing and refugee-receiving countries were in the developing world, the challenge of development should be perceived as one of the priorities on the agenda. A comprehensive approach was needed in addressing the root causes of involuntary population movements.

23. Many refugee problems could be addressed at the regional level with appropriate international support. Initiating a process of consultation among neighbouring countries could have a positive influence on the implementation and follow-up of sustainable solutions. The Regional Conference to address the problems of refugees, displaced persons, other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and relevant neighbouring States was one example. In 1995 his Government had suggested a similar conference for its own region with a view to devising preventive actions and formulating regional solutions. Over the past few months, UNHCR had held preliminary consultations with his Government and neighbouring countries, and Iran appreciated its actions.

24. The focus on a regional approach should not be at the expense of international involvement. A regional approach did not mean that only the regional countries were responsible for providing assistance to refugees. Furthermore, in any regional approach, a special relationship between the countries of origin and the receiving countries should be established. In that connection, UNHCR had to develop a practical strategy. It was also important to create a broader relationship between UNHCR and international development and financial institutions. In recent decades, the role of NGOs as partners in action in emergency situations and in the aftermath of crises had grown. His Government had welcomed that partnership and during the past several years had cooperated with the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran, but the level of NGO participation was not yet satisfactory.

25. Iran continued to host the largest refugee population in the world, with more than 2.1 million refugees. Ongoing crises in neighbouring countries and illegal immigration had further complicated the situation. While hosting 1,426,000 Afghan refugees owing to civil war and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees had dramatically decreased. During the past few months, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and UNHCR had agreed to facilitate the repatriation of Afghan refugees through Turkmenistan to northern Afghanistan. The mechanism of that operation had been finalized, but recent developments in Afghanistan had hindered the

operation. Since the desirable solution, namely, voluntary repatriation, had been made practically impossible, UNHCR should reactivate other solutions, in particular, resettlement.

26. Recent developments in northern Iraq had produced a new emergency situation and compelled Iraqi refugee populations to continue to remain in Iran. Following the outbreak of internal fighting in northern Iraq in early September 1996, some 300,000 inhabitants of war-stricken towns and villages had rushed across the borders. His Government, in line with its humanitarian policy and with full operational capacity, had provided timely emergency relief to those refugees. Together with international humanitarian organizations, it had assisted Iraqi displaced persons within the territory of their own country, but owing to the expansion of fighting to the border areas where the Kurdish asylum-seekers had gathered, Iran had undertaken to admit 60,000 of those refugees and accommodate them in five camps along the border. By admitting those refugees, the majority of whom were women and children, and not breadwinners, his Government had rescued them from tragic suffering. To date Iran had spent about US$ 10 million of its own national resources for refugees accommodated inside the country. If they prolonged their stay, especially during the long and cold winter in western Iran, both they and the host country would be faced with great problems unless the international community took serious action to assist them. Despite the fact that UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations had had full access to the refugee camps during the crisis, the level of international assistance received so far was not satisfactory, and Iran expected more contributions from donor countries and NGOs to alleviate the human suffering of the Iraqi Kurdish refugees.

27. Mr. LOHANI (Observer for Nepal) said his country had been faced with the burden of providing asylum for the largest caseload of refugees in the region. Besides the enormous economic burden, the continuing presence of a large number of refugees in already densely populated areas of Nepal for over six years had created economic, social and environmental problems. Growing deforestation and excessive pressure on social service delivery systems, groundwater supply and sanitation had greatly increased the environmental, economic and social costs. There were close to 91,000 Bhutanese refugees in 8 camps in 2 districts in eastern Nepal. As a party to all the major international human rights conventions and as a country dedicated to the norms of democracy, Nepal could not refuse them shelter. From a very early stage it had started making efforts to engage Bhutan in talks to end the problem, but a solution remained as elusive as ever.

28. During its contacts with Bhutan, Nepal had adopted a flexible approach to facilitate an early and durable solution. His Government had accepted the Bhutanese proposal to classify the refugees into four categories and had agreed to the nomenclature for those categories. The two sides had also agreed on a mechanism for joint field verification to determine the status of each individual in the refugee camps. The Nepalese Government had been proposing that field verification should be undertaken with the assistance of an organization or agency with proven competence and impartiality. The Government's dialogue partners, however, were keen on harmonizing the positions of the two countries on each of the four categories, an exercise that had dominated the last four rounds of bilateral talks.

29. Contrary to the belief held in some circles, Nepal fully respected a country's desire to preserve its unique cultural and religious heritage. National identity was an important component of political sovereignty. Yet, a national identity could be meaningful only if it provided political and economic space to all the ethnic groups and communities in a nation. Preservation of the cultural heritage of one segment of the population at the expense of the equally inviolable heritage of another important segment of the population of the same country could not be helpful in preserving peace and harmony. How a country maintained the balance and harmony was an internal affair of that State.

30. Insistence on the application of national citizenship and immigration laws in the verification process had proved to be another stumbling block. Nepal's dialogue partners insisted that most of the Bhutanese refugees had left the country of their own accord and that the laws of Bhutan decreed forfeiture of citizenship in such cases. Emphasis on that point was not helpful in solving the problem, because the Bhutanese refugees could not be citizens of Nepal. It was hard to understand that almost one sixth of the population of a country should voluntarily choose within a short period of time to renounce the safety and security of home and society in exchange for an uncertain future in a refugee camp in a foreign country. Bhutanese refugees in camps in Nepal told stories of leaving under duress. To overcome that problem, Nepal had proposed that the refugees falling under the category of those who were said to have left voluntarily should be given the option to return.

31. The problem of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal was by its very nature international, in that thousands of people from one country had crossed international borders and sought asylum in a third country that did not share a contiguous border with Bhutan. The solution therefore demanded resort to the established international norms and practices. Insistence on national legal and other procedures opened the possibility of creating statelessness on a very large scale. Despite the obvious disappointment stemming from the failure of the seven rounds of bilateral talks, Nepal was still willing to continue the search for a solution within the bilateral framework. He welcomed initiatives by the Executive Committee, UNHCR and friendly countries to help it move towards an early and lasting solution.

32. Mr. VERGNE SABOIA (Brazil) said that, in view of the multifaceted root causes of refugee influxes, he greatly valued the ongoing search for a broader recovery and reconstruction strategy that could anchor repatriation and UNHCR short-term assistance on solid ground. Whilst a period of increased stability in international affairs might be in sight, and whilst the number of refugees had decreased, there was a widespread negative perception of the scope of the refugee problem, which was considered to be on the rise. Brazil welcomed the fact that, in 1995, more than 1 million refugees had returned to their countries of origin, 450,000 of them with UNHCR assistance. It hailed the decision of the Government of Mexico to allow for the local integration of refugees from Guatemala, an initiative that could make all Latin America proud of the region's record in that area. It was regrettable that the same could not be said of the situation of the refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose plight had been addressed much more slowly than expected since the signing of the Dayton Agreements, and in the region of the Great Lakes.

33. He concurred with the growing trend to place emphasis on voluntary repatriation as a preferred solution, without ruling out third country resettlement and local integration as important options. Even if voluntary repatriation was the favoured solution, however, some refugee-generating situations might be of a long-term nature and would require other responses. Whilst Brazil understood that the emphasis on voluntary repatriation had meant that greater importance was attached to the prevention of forced displacement, the present situation in the field of international peace and security, with persistent and looming ethnic conflicts, did not make for much optimism when it came to the real possibility of anticipating and preventing the sudden surge of refugee emergencies and mass influxes. Moreover, it was accepted that purely preventive action focused on the causes of forced displacement had no support in the UNHCR mandate.

34. Brazil viewed with concern and alarm some troubling trends in the matter of protection around the world. It was indispensable for the international community to uphold and strengthen the institution of asylum and the principle of non-refoulement, the two pillars of international protection. It was important that States should be able to limit abuses and curtail illegal immigration and at the same time not prejudge the demands for asylum and guaranteed access to safety for refugees. The fine line that sometimes seemed to separate issues relating to illegal immigration and refugees should not be used as a means to blur the specific aspects pertaining to the latter question.

35. His Government was preparing a draft law to regulate the situation of refugees in the country in a comprehensive manner based on the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Brazil had also acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.

36. Mr. KOLOSSOVSKY (Russian Federation) said that the pursuit and implementation of durable solutions to the problems of mass population displacement required the elaboration of a general strategy for humanitarian action and made it possible to define more precisely the role and place of humanitarian factors in the international community's approach to crisis management. In the absence of a clear final aim and of efforts to address the root causes of massive refugee movements, humanitarian action would merely boil down to expensive efforts and assistance that depended on changing international circumstances.

37. Analysis of the complex nature of modern conflicts and of the scale of related refugee flows showed that the refugee problem was a question of national, regional and international security. Coordinated efforts in the political, social, economic and other spheres were required to eliminate the consequences and causes of crises. Their final aim should be the security of the individual in a dynamically developing society within a State governed by the rule of law. The international community as a whole shared that goal and his delegation appreciated the attention paid by UNHCR and by the humanitarian community to the concepts of "comprehensive approaches" and "preventive actions". One significant step taken recently had been the Regional Conference to address the problems of refugees, displaced persons, other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the countries of the CIS and

relevant neighbouring States. Thanks to the persistent efforts of UNHCR, and in particular of the High Commissioner, the Conference had been a creative laboratory in which all aspects of migratory flows on the territory of the CIS countries had been analysed and concrete measures developed to provide durable solutions to the problems and to prevent new flows of refugees and displaced persons. He expressed his gratitude to all the donor countries, and in particular to Switzerland, which had made that forum possible.

38. The Conference had thoroughly analysed the complex migratory processes under way within the post-Soviet area and had recognized that their significance spread far beyond the region. It was the responsibility of the international community to take concrete steps to support the efforts of the CIS countries to solve the refugee problems and to implement without delay the substantive Programme of Action adopted by the Conference.

39. His delegation appreciated that the main responsibility for implementing the Conference's decisions lay with the CIS States, and Russia had already embarked on the task. It was examining the possibility of making specific amendments to the laws on refugees and forced migrants, had made appropriate amendments to the Framework law on migration policy and strengthened federal and regional organs of the national migration service. The recently adopted national social programmes on employment, family protection and women and children contained special sections on migration matters. Coordination had also begun to combat illegal migration in the CIS countries, with which several bilateral agreements on resettlement processes had been signed.

40. However, it was important for national efforts to be supported by international assistance, based on the principle of international solidarity embodied in the Conference's final document, in order not only to reduce the migratory pressure on the economies of the CIS countries but to create an additional psychological impulse. In that connection, his delegation welcomed the UNHCR/IOM joint operational strategy in the CIS countries for the years 1996 to 2000. He appealed to donors to support the strategy and was grateful to the United States of America, which had announced its Government's decision to allocate US$ 1.5 million to implement the Conference's decisions.

41. As to some of the preliminary results of the Conference, a number of elements were of universal significance. First of all, humanitarian efforts to resolve the problems of refugees and migrants had to be combined with broader political action by the international community to overcome crises and to link humanitarian assistance with a smooth transition from emergency aid to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of societies. The search for and implementation of long-term solutions relating to repatriation, integration or resettlement in third countries should be constant. Attention should focus not only on emergencies but also on the creeping process of forced migration. Regions where no lasting solution was found posed the constant threat of a new explosion, as was apparent in Bosnia, in the African Great Lakes region and currently in Afghanistan. Such explosive situations still persisted in the "hot spots" of the CIS: Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh and Tajikistan where Russia's peace-making efforts needed to be underpinned by humanitarian assistance.

42. Decisions on long-term solutions should be realistic and should meet the needs of people, with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol as the fundamental point of reference. The observance of human rights together with opposition to discrimination, national and religious intolerance and aggressive nationalism were important prerequisites for preventing refugee flows, as well as an integral part of a comprehensive approach to the problems of involuntary displacement. Of great importance was a solution to the problem of citizenship in certain States and he wished to express his delegation's support for UNHCR's efforts in that respect. It was the permanent link between the individual and the State responsible for his protection that prevented crises and potential refugee flows, and it was no secret that his Government was particularly concerned about the citizenship problem in Estonia and Latvia.

43. As for follow-up machinery, his delegation appreciated UNHCR's role in developing approaches to population displacements and believed that the Office should become the lead agency whenever crises led to the emergence of large-scale refugee flows. UNHCR possessed appropriate know-how and operational resources and skilled personnel. He was grateful to the High Commissioner for the programmes implemented by UNHCR in Russia, in particular for the benefit of the victims of the Chechen crisis. Hopefully, the steps taken by the Federal authorities to consolidate a peaceful solution to the crisis would allow inhabitants of the Chechen Republic of all nationalities to return to normal, peaceful lives, and the restoration of peace would enable UNHCR to work there.

44. He also stressed that the first results were to be seen of the improved coordination among the humanitarian institutions, resulting from the adoption of Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/56. The emphasis placed at the Interagency Standing Committee on mutually complementary efforts, the use of comparative advantages and more accurate role distribution in field operations were a step in the right direction. Perhaps the Executive Committee would move further in that direction at the present session. A flexible, operational or even modular system for United Nations humanitarian activities, free from monopolism and hyper-centralization was the way forward. He wished to thank UNHCR for its tireless efforts and for the heroism and self-control demonstrated daily in the world's "hot spots".

45. Mr. STEIN BARILLAS (Observer for Guatemala) said that his Government attached the utmost priority to durable solutions to refugee problems. The framework in which new solutions were being implemented was characterized by the progress in the peace negotiations between the Government and URNG, which heralded an end to the 36-year-long armed conflict and paved the way to definitive and lasting solutions to the refugee problem in Guatemala, thanks to the elimination of the political causes. Populations were no longer expelled by the counter-insurgency war and the refugee camps had become the vanguard for a process of reconciliation and development, in which peaceful productive coexistence, rather than war, was the norm.

46. His Government wished to reiterate its open door policy as a mark of its determination to provide a lasting solution to the problems of refugees. Guatemala had made and was continuing to make its contributions, not only

through political negotiations but also through direct investment of its own resources to permit repatriation. The Government had invested almost US$ 70 million of its own funds, in addition to the generous contribution by the international community, in the returnee process and in the purchase of land for reintegration. The immediate offer of land was still available. Guatemala's debt of gratitude to the Government and people of Mexico was incalculable.

47. Guatemala had reached a turning point at which it was making a qualitative leap towards alternative and joint efforts by Mexico and Guatemala to identify durable solutions within a sustainable framework. Such joint efforts were unprecedented and had enabled Guatemala to enrich its own effort with Mexico's generous tradition of granting political asylum and welcoming with open arms persecuted populations from various climes. It was a fitting conclusion to the CIREFCA process. When the Mexico City Conference had closed, the situation in Mexico and Guatemala had been left pending. A durable solution had now been found.

48. The situation regarding internally displaced persons was different. The problem of the reintegration of persons demobilized from the guerilla and the armed forces was compounded by the reintegration of populations displaced by the conflict and factors linked to urban poverty. Lasting solutions to refugee problems were necessarily interlinked with solutions to the problem of internal population displacements.

49. Lasting solutions were possible as a result of two interrelated approaches: Mexico's noteworthy decision to permit Guatemalan refugees in the Campeche and Quintana Roo camps to stay where they were by changing their status, and the comprehensive development programme for border areas recently agreed on by the Presidents of Mexico and Guatemala. One of the basic features of the lasting solution was that refugees were no longer compelled to return to their country of origin and did so only if they wished. The refugee camps contained a population which had been born and grown up in them over the past 15 years, and had experienced only life in the camps. For the children of the original refugees, return would be their first experience of being uprooted. In the Campeche and Quintana Roo camps, the refugees had developed productive activities which ensured not only self-reliance but made a significant contribution to Mexico's GDP.

50. Another basic consideration was the need for economic, social, political, cultural and ecological sustainability not only for selected groups but for entire areas, so that the short-term emergency effort could lead on to development processes and programmes, thus ensuring that the areas of integration in Mexico, and of reintegration in Guatemala, became areas of peace which ensured their inhabitants' prosperity. To that end, solutions were being implemented within a framework of sustainability wherein populations were offered the choice of returning or remaining. Mexico afforded them the opportunity to change their migratory status and to take their place in normal economic life and, in the long term, to choose Mexican nationality. Guatemala, for its part, had introduced legislative reform to permit dual nationality.

51. Thus, over the medium and long term the border between Mexico and Guatemala would no longer be seen as a cordon sanitaire or a barbed wire fence but as an area for joint development. None the less, it was an area marked by precarious conditions, one already beset by serious problems before the counter-insurgency war had started. Although the political roots of the conflict had been eliminated, the social and economic roots remained. It was the remotest, poorest and most neglected area in Guatemala, lacking roads, electricity and telecommunications. A total of 250,000 Guatemalans crossed the border each year to work as temporary agricultural labourers. If the economic situation in Chiapas improved, Mexican labourers from the north would be able to take their place. In 1995 the daily wage had been US$ 1.35, some 80,000 people had been engaged in smuggling and part of the area had been used for poppy cultivation, which offered a far higher return than traditional crops. For the first time, those economic and social problems were being addressed on a binational footing, and the most recent technical meeting between both Governments had led to a number of tangible steps. They included an agreement for the return of 18 groups within the next six months, for a Guatemalan office to be opened in the border town of Comitan, for regular annual visits to be made by Guatemalan mayors to Chiapas to establish direct contacts with future returnees and a decision promptly to inform the embassies of Mexico in Guatemala and of Guatemala in Mexico of any developments.

52. Such progress would not have been possible without the successful political negotiations that had resolved the domestic armed conflict and without the consolidation and development of democracy which, through the successive elections of legitimately established civil governments had made it possible to open the way to participation. Nor would those developments have been possible without the cooperation of the international community, and in particular the generosity and imagination of the Government of Mexico, which had accompanied Guatemala along that arduous path.

53. Mr. CODWELL (Observer for Mexico) said that Mexico had a rich history in the area of refugees. In 1980 the Government had created the Mexican Commission of Refugee Aid and Mexico was also a member of the group of nations that had promoted the Cartagena Declaration, which had expanded the definition of a refugee. It had later incorporated that new definition in its own domestic legislation to afford legal protection for all those who entered Mexico under the definition's criteria.

54. After the Spanish Civil War, the Government of Mexico had opened its embassies and consulates in Europe to offer protection to thousands of Spanish refugees, who had been integrated in Mexico, where they had remade their lives. The contribution of the Spanish community lived on in Mexico in the universities, Mexican culture and the economy. Mexico had subsequently received other notable, albeit less numerous, refugees from central and South American countries who had received equally effective and humane protection.

55. The most notable and critical refugee situation in terms of volume and characteristics had occurred in 1981, with the arrival, across Mexico's southern border, of some 45,000 mainly indigenous, peasant Guatemalan refugees fleeing the armed conflict in Guatemala. They had found a favourable environment in Mexico, where they had settled in ecosystems similar to

their own and where they shared common cultural and ethnic identities and occupations. Mexico had provided them with land and support from its aid institutions. UNHCR had provided international funds for educational, medical and productive programmes and had helped to improve the living conditions of the refugee families.

56. The Presidents of Mexico and Guatemala had recently agreed on the terms of a joint durable solution to the problem of the refugee community in Mexican territory. Mexico recognized, before the international community, the Guatemalan Government's repatriation endeavours, for it had invested its own resources to purchase farms and done its best efforts to reach a durable peace that guaranteed the refugees an environment of security, justice and democracy.

57. Nevertheless, Mexico's own experience had taught it that repatriation alone was not enough to achieve an integrated and durable solution to the refugee problem. Repatriation had to be complemented with receiving-country integration programmes. For that reason, the Mexican Government had implemented a Migratory Stabilization Plan for Guatemalan refugees, aimed at their descendants and the populations of its Guatemalan neighbour. The Plan offered immigrant status to those refugees settled in the States of Campeche and Quintana Roo that wished to remain indefinitely in Mexico and enabled them to acquire rights comparable to those of Mexicans in all areas of life, with the exception of voting rights and the right to hold political office, and subject to other constitutional restrictions on land ownership. During the five years following the granting of immigrant status the Mexican Government would continue to respect the principle of non-forcible return. After that period, the refugees would obtain permanent residence and no longer require protection from the Mexican Commission of Refugee Aid or from UNHCR.

58. The Mexican Government also offered Mexican nationality, under an expedited procedure, to all spouses of Mexicans, parents of Mexican children and refugees that had arrived in Mexico as minors and reached adult age while living there. The Mexican integration plan considerably expanded the human rights of the refugees, which were comparable to those of Mexicans in the case of those who opted for immigrant status and identical for those who chose Mexican nationality. Refugees took the relevant decisions of their own free will.

59. The refugee families in the State of Chiapas, who were less integrated than in Campeche and Quintana Roo, would be granted a new status under which they would be temporarily classified as non-immigrants. However, that status would considerably extend their right freely to move, to work and to purchase property. At the same time, the Mexican Government had, with the cooperation of UNHCR, initiated a study of migratory and socio-economic trends, due to be completed in 1997, in order to identify viable and lasting solutions to the specific problems of the refugee community in Chiapas.

60. In addition to stabilizing the migratory flows, the Mexican plan consolidated the economic self-sufficiency and welfare programmes initiated with the cooperation of UNHCR 14 years ago. Refugees, and in particular minors, who wished to move from the countryside to the cities would be offered nine levels of education and training, while the population that stayed in the

camps would benefit from improvements in the agricultural infrastructure, technical assistance, reforestation projects and credit support. The electricity and water networks would be consolidated to convert the camps into towns rather than temporary settlements. The plan involved Mexican peasants in the development programmes in order to consolidate the refugee camps as rural micro-region development centres. A total of 7 refugee camps and 12 Mexican communities were to be included in the plan and it was estimated that the economic self-sufficiency and social welfare programmes would benefit some 25,000 persons, 53 per cent of whom were refugees and 47 per cent Mexicans, thereby making local integration more complete by developing the social, cultural and economic community of interests between indigenous Guatemalans and their Mexican brothers.

61. In addition to channelling its own resources into those programmes, Mexico had requested international funds from UNHCR and the European Union. The stabilization of their status, backed by education and income-generation programmes would enable refugees, whose first concern had been to safeguard their physical integrity, to pursue the higher objective of improving their standard of living by fully exercising their individual liberties.

62. Mexico was gratified by the fruitful and instructive experience it had shared with UNHCR and with the Government of Guatemala in providing a solution that allowed refugee families to resume normal lives. It was equally pleased to demonstrate how political action in fostering a concerted will that had made it possible to solve the most dramatic of human problems. That vigorous effort would undoubtedly yield fruits that would bring happiness to thousands of inhabitants of ancient Mesoamerica, who would be able to live in freedom thanks to international cooperation.

The meeting rose at 5.35 p.m.